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ABSTRACT

This presentation describes dropout facts and prevention methods based on nationwide interviews with dropout runaways. Potential dropout runaways might be labeled the "distracted ones." They have trouble concentrating in a typical classroom situation as they are distracted by events that happened at home or that might happen after school. Such events might include domestic violence, neglect, or physical, emotional, or sexual abuse. The cost to the nation of dropout runaways is fourfold: (1) they drop out of school before they learn acceptable marketable skills; (2) their potential contributions to society are lost; (3) they resort to unacceptable illegal means of survival; and (4) they drain the resources of educational, social, health, and correctional agencies. Survival is the primary goal of these youth in crisis. Only if school and education are seen as a high priority for survival will they sustain concentration and block their distractions. Direct-contact educators can make the difference. This report outlines: (1) 40 common characteristics of dropout runaways, (2) the choices such youth might make for survival, (3) warning signs that a youth is about to run, and (4) 40 possible actions an educator might take as preventive or remedial techniques. Workshop materials include case histories of dropout runaways and how their lives turned out, and specific instructions to guide educators in developing relationships with such youth. (SV)

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PREVENTING DROPOUT RUNAWAYS*

Dropout prevention is not an unusual focus in all schools, urban and rural, but developing dropout prevention methods and materials based on national interviews of dropout runaways is a different approach.

This At-Risk or Low-Incidence population affects our national security and economic strength. They might be labled The Distracted Ones. They have a difficult time concentrating in a typical classroom situation as they are distracted by concerns for events that happened before they left home or are worried about what might happen when they leave school. Whether female or male, they worry about rape, beatings, suicide, bondage, verbal abuse, accidents, illness, homelessness, AIDS, family fragmentation, law officers, loneliness, starvation, rejection, prostitution, drugs, rage, escape, and helplessness. Their threats are both external and internal.

Their cost to the nation is fourfold. (1) They drop out of school before they learn acceptable marketable skills. (2) Their potential contributions to society are lost. (3) They resort to unacceptable illegal means of survival. (4) They drain the resources of educational, social, health, and correctional agencies.

Survival is their primary goal. They will take whatever action is needed, as they determine, to survive. Only if education in school is viewed by them as a high priority for survival will they sustain concentration and block their distractions. The direct-contact educators make the difference.

Youth in crisis under extreme real or perceived stress make choices, tradeoffs, when they perceive danger. They submit, withdraw, ignore, retaliate, get help, or commit suicide.

While success cannot be assured for the survival, happiness, and productivity of all potential or real dropout runaways, success can be within the reach of far more of The Distracted Ones than at present.

Educators who wish to be effective need to know as much as possible about the danger, the youth, their choices, the warning signs, preventive techniques, and remedial actions.

Based on my travels nationwide to interview dropout runnaways who had survived, they have much in common even though each case is unique.

Common characteristics found in my interviews were that they:

1) typically drop out and run away at age fourteen; an age when they can't tolerate their situation any more and they can work out a plan that makes it possible to escape (they made earlier attempts that failed because of size, appearance, money, direction, and experience),

2) have survival for the moment as their primary instinctive goal (they are motivated to live without torture),

3) are creatively intelligent in working out a plan that works to run away and to keep surviving,

4) are handicapped educationally whether due to birth, accident or environment,

5) achieved in school average or better through grade three after which grades fluctuated downward,

6) had good relations with teachers until grades dropped, absenteeism

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increased, and conflicts were personalized,

7) felt they had no one to turn to for open discussions of feelings and problems, much less help (even their peer group deserted unless they also planned escape),

8) had one or more reasons to escape, such as beatings, rape, isolation, being locked in a room, starvation, thirst, verbal attacks, attempted killing,

9) are determined, energetic, tough fighters who make their own rules to survive,

10) were called rebellious, antisocial, troublemakers, no-good, worthless and rotten,

11) were not going to commit suicide even though they had thought of it,

12) were blamed and punished from early ages for things siblings and friends did,

13) were capable of escaping parents, social workers, police, and private detectives,

14) were willing to do anything to survive, such as live on the street, sleep sitting up anywhere, beg, sell sex and drugs, go for days without eating, and eat garbage,

15) are accomplished at acting happy, sad, angry, innocent--whatever will fit the situation,

16) listen and observe well for survival clues (parents, teachers, and other adults often criticized them for lack of listening to them),

17) are sensitive to the feeling of others (are charitable when possible to others in need) but personal survival comes first,

18) are suspicious of motives of entrapment or of do-gooders who have hidden agendas,

19) are open, honest and loyal after you gain their trust,

20) are sufficiently verbal to mask other weaknesses,

21) are able to switch to extremes of emotions rapidly if situations shift,

22) are able to run and hide for safety,

23) appeared to have learning disablities in school which prevented the use of high achievement as a means of escape (lacked confidence in school activities),

24) were verbally and physically kicked by everyone as they started sliding so they accelerated to the bottom,

25) often slept restlessly ready to escape (their travel bag was packed ready to go),

26) are relatively healthy under the circumstances in that their bodies withstood much abuse, including inadequate diets and illnesses without doctors or medication,

27) are peace loving, wanting a world without violance and bias,

28) want attention, affection, love and caring,

29) are afraid to trust, to care, to love, or to cry in public,

30) are lonely, defiant, angry, and depressed,

31) are afraid that their experiences might affect their chances for the type of life they want which often includes marriage, children, peace and happiness,

32) experienced broken family structures and multiple community moves such as associated with single or divorced parents,

33) often were children of veterans,

34) perceived conflicting messages and actions from agency representatives proposing to be of assistance,

35) want to get ahead, to prove themselves to family and others, will take chances, and will work hard (even if it is to sell drugs or sex) to succeed,

36) will attempt manipulation and deception as a means to immediate survival

and happiness,

37) spend money as fast as received for immediate pleasures as tomorrow may never come,

38) cover or withstand pain rather than seek help,

39) are from all areas of the country, and

40) are from all economic backgrounds.

The choices these youth face might be summarized as that of committing suicide, submitting, ignoring, withdrawing, retaliating, or getting help.

Suicide is considered by most, attempted by few, but ruled out as not appropiate as it would not accomplish an improvement but might seriously upset loved friends.

Submitting is seldom considered. They seek a better life. They don't want to give in to a life of beatings and other cruel abuse.

They often try to ignore their hurt but they reach a limit to their tolerance.

Retaliation is considered but they prefer peace and a life without violence.

Some aren't believed and are punished for telling a lie. For some help is simply another form of cruelty, not a solution.

Withdrawing or running is the only sensible solution for them. After so much pain they can only concentrate on escaping, getting away from the hurt.

Youth who may run away give increasing levels and numbers of warning signs which may not be noticed, may be misinterpreted, or which may not receive appropriate attention. Transient populations create added problems for detection as behavioral baselines are often missing.

Changes in habits, moods, and attitudes provide warning signs. Schools that have many transients and move staff or students every fifty minutes have little structured opportunities to spot warning signs. It is as important to notice behavioral changes that are acceptable as well as those that are unacceptable. Pleasing actions may be masking inner turmoil or may be a planned cover for escape. Unexpected behavioral changes may be signals that a decision has been made to pursue a plan of action. That plan may even be to kill the oppressor.

Observe changes within short periods of time in cleanliness, clothing, movements, eye contact, voice, use of hands, writing, conversations, eating, withdrawal, weight, alertness, involvement, health, accidents, achievement, attendance, and concentration.

Preventive and remedial or corrective actions should start anytime. Although we like to focus on starting young, at birth with the right set of parents and the right environment, that is not the final solution for all. Even if a child got off to a good start, situations change and influence each person differently. An accident, the loss of a loved one, divorce, alcohol, drugs, illness, and financial hardships are factors that could trigger the need for help. It is never too late. While it may seem easier to train a young child to be prepared for dealing with life and death it isn't impossible to retrain an older person. It may actually be easier and require less time. The key word may be readiness, motivation, or desire.

Although early childhood education may be perceived by some as the answer to dropout prevention, early childhood education cannot anticipate and prepare for every contingency nor would every child be ready to learn or find the learning meaningful. The quantity and quality of variables affecting the life of a child appear to be ever increasing. Thus, some children will not be prepared for the critical events that occur into their teens.

Therefore, educators must be prepared to apply remedial and corrective action as well as preventive at all ages. There is no age that is too old to be effective

IF that youth is receptive and finds the learning experiences meaningful to effect the desired results for survival, happiness, and productivity.

Think of each young person as though that child were your own. Each is a fellow human who, for whatever the reason, is a timebomb just ticking away until there is an explosion or implosion. You and your actions might make the difference. You might be able to provide an opportunity for change. Consider the following actions as your contributions to saving a child:

1) model your expectations for youth, and be prepared to provide a model for as long as 50% of their age (if the youth is 16, give him 8 more years to model for lifetime changes), practice consistent controlled behaviors,

2) avoid conflicting behaviors by modeling those that are desired, with patience and suggestions for another way,

3) recognize that antisocial conflict-inducing behaviors may only be survival reactions to situations that remind them of danger; recognize attempts to manipulate and ask why,

4) ask them about their life-threatening experiences so that you might avoid threatening words, actions and touching and so you might structure desensitization in various settings,

5) strive for mutual understandings, as a starter, empathy not sympathy, so there is mutual acceptence of humans with problems and burdens,

6) model your own survival achievement skills to provide a feeling of strength and security on which they might lean when needed, (a strong older sibling, parent, or grandparent substitute),

7) help them unload or set aside their fear of the past, or of the night, so they can concentrate on learning for survival and goals of enjoyment; it is difficult to learn abstract content for future use while there is fear of the present, future, or past,

8) use achievement as a path to escape, to happiness, and to productivity so they can concentrate on learning and not on abuse; help them achieve skills, knowledge and behaviors as weapons for achievement; make acquisition a step-at-a-time path to meaningful escape,

9) act as a mature adult who knows self and is in control of the situation so they can establish faith and confidence in you,

10) analyze and know yourself well physically, intellectually, and emotionally and practice your own self-improvement schedule before you set about working with another on self-analysis and improvement schedules, be organized,

11) test the details of environmental effects on their nervous system (variations of lighting, touch, food, beverages, sounds, temperatures, smells, space, time, and positions may make differences for which accommodation must be found); get medical and dental exams,

12) develop a comfort-zone total environment, one of zero threats, to build a series of successful experiences (take them into a physical, mental, emotional non-threatening artificial situation, if necessary, and control sights, sound, smells, temperature, and body sensations),

13) talk about long-range goals until they start expressing dreams and directions which can then be broken into shorter objectives with small achievement steps; accept them and their present level as a base on which together you lay a building stone of achievement each day,

14) talk about how their past experiences will be of benefit in reaching their goals; they are successful survivors who can now put those experiences to use for they know much about the extremes of human emotions on which to build; don't criticize or condemn the past people or events, move onward to a better life,

15) develop non-threatening individualized approches to checking their levels

of comprehension, memory, transfer, and receptivity of messages; find deficit areas and help them develop coping, compensating, or concentrating strategies that work for them,

16) talk about how most of us want to conceal any inadequacies or lack of understanding and how they might help us develop to our mutual benefit; help them feel less threatened in sharing their lack of understanding and problems in learning,

17) talk about, model, and practice together listening techniques and how they might be used by them to increase their survival, well-being, and productivity,

18) talk about, model, and practice listening techniques and their benefits,

19) recognize that concentration on learning for long-term goals can only follow a reduction in fear of life-threatening situations; reduce one fear and add one bit of knowledge or skill one day at a time,

20) recognize that their belief in you must be earned by proving that you do have something to offer which will have power over their abusive situations; be able to offer proof,

21) identify the talent and creativeness that they developed in managing to survive and mutually explore how it might be used for gain as well as for preservation; compliment their resourcefulness and utilize those knowledges and skills for tranfer learning,

22) recognize that any purpose or reason that you express for their improvement is yours and not theirs; until they express purpose or reason for engaging in an activity, you are wasting time and energy,

23) provide consulting help in finding alternatives to the problem situations no matter how large or small (problem solving and decision-making skills are vital to survival and well-being); target one success each day,

24) use an equal partnership approach for mutual benefit, a win-win relationship, so that you avoid thoughts of force, constraint, or power which is countered until it explodes or implodes; cool it,

25) leave constraint, force or threats to police or the courts, that is their role,

26) practice genuine and sincere complimenting and praising for they are fantastic survivors of a jungle you may never wish to experience; don't be a phony and dont be condescending,

27) practice asking them for assistance in areas in which you wish to improve; strive for mutual trust and respect; each person must try to accept the other at their level of accomplishment and help develop from there,

28) ask for and accept criticism in areas in which you offend or hurt them and ask them to help you find another way, offer reciprocity help for mutual benefits as well as for consequences,

29) share when you have an off-day, apoligize when you err, and you will develop mutual caring and understanding (benefits and consequences are mutual),

30) look for solutions and alternatives to standard practices that don't work as opportunities for mutual gain (flexibility and creativity are vital),

31) when achievement is jagged, low in non-survival areas and high in immediate survival areas, look for ways of identifying and reducing barriers which might not be visible (always seek another way instead of closing doors); reduce one barrier each day and record one gain,

32) accept adult responsibility for a life you may help save as a listener, a supporter, a model, a teacher, and a friend who cares; offer of yourself, your time, and your energy which will work more miracles than money can buy,

33) adopt a youth in need; model and accept responsibility that goes beyond institutional or governmental efforts; join hands with others in a comminity to

get commitment and involvement in all aspects of life and living,

34) offer your telephone number for 24-hour emergency listening or pick-up service; consider uniting with similar purpose others,

35) campaign against the slavery of children, no one should be an owner of another, parenthood is accepance of reponsibility not of ownership; focus on the right of a child to be a human and not a slave or a puppet of parents, foster parents or others,

36) be vigilante volunteers against foul play, assist courts in gathering evidence, assist legislators in monitoring and rewriting laws, support remedies, demonstrate leadership,

37) offer meaningful suggestions to parents and people in service agencies instead of just being critical (be positively aggressive in seeking immediate solutions), encourage a mutual "brother's keeper" attitude in which we all win or lose,

38) promote legislation which would allow public schools to have single lines of full authority and funding as legal full-time surrogate parents for up to age 30, if necessary, to remediate situations for youth in need, subject to review by state authorities and courts if complaints are registered,

39) develop and implement early childhood through high school curriculum and instuction packages for the emotional development of all youth for survival in personal, social, and occupational situations, and

40) dont wait, time is of essence and action needs to be taken rapidly when a youth with a need is identified; school boards are the most responsible local agencies to provide needed actions for twelve-month 24-hour service; these youth need surrogate parents in whom they can confide and to whom they can turn for help; they need confidantes on whom they can lean.

These are Distracted Youth. They are confused and lost. Give them a single line of authority with a structure for them to develop clear values, life-goals, short-term objectives, sequential activities, drive and self-discipline for delayed gratification.

Observe successful Alternative Education Plans such as at the Mount Senario College at Ladysmith, Wisconsin where youth from area rural school districts are given one last chance. With parent approval they are tuitioned to the College were they get tutorial assistance under the direction of a master teacher and support from the education faculty. The commitment of staff, parents, students, and related personnel is working. It's a model in it's beginning.

The next step is to increase involvement and commitment nationwide. This is a serious problem affecting all of us. Dropout runaways are involved in alcoholism, in drugs, in AIDS, in prostitution, and in crime when there appear to be no other solutions to life and living. We all pay the price of inaction. Students, parents, teachers, community groups, and political leaders must band together to study the issue and to make decisions for change.

Education, health, social, correctional, and job service agencies can no longer operate in isolation and blame each other for failure, lack of funds, lack of authority or lack of responsibility.

Find or start an interested group in your community. Distribute copies of materials I've developed. The materials are self-directive. Use them in your classrooms and with teacher and parent groups. They will stimulate and prompt plans of action.

Problem solving activities include such topics as City Clusters, Rural Runaways, Free Meals, Rape Victims, Ownership, Splintered Families, Incidence, Abuse, Suicide, and Violence.

Decision making activities include such topics as Gambling, Prostitution,

Blackmailing, AIDS, and Drug Dealing.

Role playing activities include such topics as Failure, Teen Parenthood, Sexual Abuse, Verbal Abuse, and Begging.

Living solution activities include Listen, Question, Apology, Thanks, Flip It, Laugh, Request, Involve and Praise.

In closing, remember that Mary and John may be your children, grandchildren, or those of your friend next door. Both were victims of rape and verbal abuse. It is not uncommon for those who are closest to be the most abusive. Parents, foster parents, uncles, clergy and camp counselors are usually respected by other adults and can avoid detection with a combination of threats and favors to the youth and sweet words to authorities.

Think of Jon and Jill who first had step-parents and then foster parents who liked to hit. Beatings started early in life. Drunk adults blamed children for standing in their way to success and happiness. When authorities came close they moved to another apartment.

You can make a difference but don't be a pretender. Don't pretend to listen. Don't pretend to care. Don't be a phony. They can sense phonies and you won't get their trust.

Start today to make your plan to organize and mobilize for needed change. Make up your mind to save just one child from a life of homelessness and hopelessness.

*Speech prepared for the Ninth Annual National Rural Special Education Conference in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida. The workshop materials followed the presentation.

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PREVENTING DROPOUT RUNAWAYS*

Mary and Paul were fourteen. Both were victims of long-term sexual abuse within their own bed by a close friend of the family who had been invited to stay at their home while between jobs. Both tried to get help by telling their teachers. Both ran because of slow response from responsible agencies.

Others might have fought back as did Ann who used a kitchen knife one night. Some commit suicide. A few submit to continued abuse. Some try to ignore, to imagine that nothing is happening that is wrong. Some go for help such as did Matt only to get slapped, hard, by his mother for telling such a lie about his pastor. Then he ran.

Every runaway that I interviewed in my nationwide travels had been abused by someone close to the family--a friend, a member of the church, a foster parent, a counselor. Abuse takes on many forms. Any form hurts whether sexual, verbal, or beatings.

Rick dropped out of school at age fifteen, a year later than most that I interviewed. Learning wasn't easy in school although he did all right on the two full-time jobs he held when I met him at age twenty-six. He was a hands-on learner who got what he needed at the two short-order restaurants in Tampa. He had come from a rural community over 900 miles away. His mother's brothers and sisters didn't believe in him. When his father died, he ran to prove to the rest that he could make it on his own.

Some run and turn to alcohol. Some try to make it at gambling like Jon who begged on the streets of Las Vegas for money to eat but which ended on the poker tables. Some turn to prostitution whether male or female. Some steal. Some, like Jack, get into sales--sales of drugs and sales of sex. Jack entertained wealthy ladies of L.A. He was a great short order cook, mixed super drinks, and had connections to get anything they wanted. When I met Jack, he had also mastered English, French, Spanish, Italian, Russian, and German. By this time, he had a small business and blackmailed his best customers.

Mo was already a grandfather at age 30. He ran at fourteen from Alabama to Chicago, met another runaway, Michelle, and had a child at fifteen who had a child by fifteen. Mo ran because his mother slept with his uncle when his father was away. She sued for a divorce and married the uncle who knew that Mo knew what had happened. As stepfather, he beat Mo until Mo ran. Now at 30 he was a father, grandfather and a veteran.

Dropout runaways are not limited to poor or rich, male or female, city or rural. They come from everywhere. They cluster in cities like New Orleans, New York, Las Vegas, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Chicago and others but they come from everywhere, even the most rural areas.

While we focus on early childhood prevention activities and often think that age seventeen is too late, it is not. It is never too late to try for change.

Tim was twenty-two when I extended a helping hand. He had attempted running a number of times but was finally successful at seventeen. His father left when he was eleven. His mother tried killing him by choking. He was removed to a group foster home. He was abused repeatedly by the foster father. He was blamed by others for wrongdoings by companions. When I met him, he was living one day at a time. Money was spent as soon as received. He had taken handouts. He had eaten garbage. He had slept curled up on darkened doorways. He had dropped out

of high school. He had run. He had survived in whatever way he could and some ways weren't very pleasant.

Today Tim is successful, happy, and productive. He completed the GED for high school equivalency within one month of concentrated studying once he decided that he wanted a better life and the way was through the Army. He mastered negotiations and compromise while dating and then planning a wedding. He is married, completed basic and advanced training, and is planning at least twenty years in the Army. He is having $100 monthly for the first year deducted so that he can have $10,000 for college to be a teacher as a second career. While in service, he will continue to study to advance rank to get the highest possible retirement benefits.

In just fifteen months of concentrated effort, patience, perseverance, fortitude, and modeling the life style he wanted, I was able to help Tim get a birth certificate, develop goals, set and achieve objectives, develop listening habits, learn to drive, double his bowling scores, complete a GED, give and accept love, gain a family to replace his lost one, plan marriage, and start a career. Tim made a leap from one world to another. I became the parents he lost.

The story of Greg is less spectacular. He finished high school on his own by living with a friend and working part-time to support himself. Greg needed someone to listen to him, to provide indirect counseling to rebuild his confidence after rape, and to help him set goals with strategies to reach them. Today Greg is working one job 45 hours a week as a motel assistant manager while he keeps plugging away at his prime goal of advertising designer.

Many stories can be told including those that ended in tragedies. With all the stories there are many commonalities. There are many lessons to be learned. There are things that can be done to bring about changes in their lives which affect all of us. Dropout runaways turn to non-productive means of survival which cost all of us. They sell sex and drugs. They beg and steal. They are underachievers who will do or work at anything to survive.

When they have time to dream it is about peace and a world without bias. They just don't know how to go about it. You can start anytime with any age. Start by examining your hang-ups. Are you baised about behaviors of youth who run? Can you deal with it? Can you provide them help to change without condeming them? Are you prepared for abusive language, arguments, and prostiution? Are you prepared for long hours, exhaustion, and defeat?

If so, your reward can be unconditional love and gratitude. You can feel the touch of a spontaneous hug from one who withdrew like a caged animal from your first touch.

It can be done.

Start by getting acquainted with yourself. Inventory your physical, intellectual, and emotional characteristics. Invite others to help with your assessment. The better you know yourself, the better you can help others to know themselves.

Identify areas in which you want to improve. Develop and work the plan. Have others monitor and evaluate your progress. Be partners in progress with the youth you wish to help. Model a desire and efforts for improvement.

A common habit is that of talking instead of listening. Practice listening and questioning until the other person starts questioning. All of us tend to talk too much.

Find out why there are sudden changes in behavior, whether acceptable or unacceptable. Watch for warning signs for possible dropout runaways. Changes in eye contact, voice, body movements, grades, friendships, or appearance may indicate something is troubling the youngster. Perhaps the youth is worrying

about sexual abuse, beatings, alcoholism, drugs, divorce, yelling, homelessness or starvation.

A teacher may do the most enlightening presentation in the world but unless the youth is attending, is ready, is motivated, the instruction is falling short. Get acquainted, know their concerns, enlist the aid of others, improve their conditions, and illustrate for them that education is a way out of their situation. Education has opened doors of opportunity for many, including me. Let it help them too.

Give a thorough check for disabilities. Arrange for a comprehensive medical exam. Test and observe for learning disabilities. Continue to make observational notes which can track inconsistencies and abnormalities. Their disabilities are often intertwined with their problems at home. Take nothing for granted. Don't assume that they couldn't be victims of rape from a foster parent. Don't assume that they come from a "good" home. Be a Sherlock Holmes. Investigate.

Take on a special case and try to make a difference. My latest case is age nineteen and in jail. He lost parents at a young age. His speech and other disabilities interfered with successful foster home placement and so he was transferred a number of times. He made his way without structure, without defined consistent values, without goals, without direction. After attempted suicide, alcoholism, and a sex abuse charge he was jailed. The correctional system now demands justice. I don't know the answer but I am full of questions. We need to question ourselves and our system in a continuing search for answers.

Unfortunately, there is no Disneyworld approach for parent, teacher, or service provider to suddenly understand all about dropout runaways. I invite all of you to shed your life style, put on old faded jeans and spend a week with the young beggars, prostitutes, and con-artists on Polk, Castro, and Bourbon Streets. If you don't have the time or money, at least organize groups for Role Playing, Problem Solving, and Decision Making Activities where I expose situations and invite you to develop local solutions. Adapt and expand on Living Solution practices of listening, questioning, praising, requesting, laughing, apologizing, thanking, involving, and flipping. You need to not only know their individual learning styles but also need to know their blocks to learning the priorities you have determined. Teaching, thereafter, is no different than for others in your classrooms but you need to add Living or Survival Solutions to their curriculum. Unless they can survive, forget it. And, survival for them is a 24-hour 365-day ordeal.

Never Too Late

Mike, a dropout runaway who lived with me for fifteen months, couldn't be with us today because he is now in the Army. He gives this message to you.

We could have titled out text "Nobody's Listening." I'm Mike, one of those who survived.

Many people ask questions of runaways or of those who might consider running.

They pretend to listen by leaning forward and appearing to hear.

They repeat what they think might or should have been said.

The runaway, or potential, clams up since that's not what they said or intended and they think that there is just another person who doesn't listen.

The runaway gives up on finding a listening responsible adult.

Running is the only way to escape what is perceived as an impossible situation.

Try having another youth or adult observe and listen when you have a conversation with a runaway potential or critique you on your listening and reaction/responding behaviors.

Let the observer make notes as to words you use that are turn-offs or that

bring cringes to facial muscles. Let the observer watch for reactions to the clothes you wear and to your body actions. Your voice, clothing, smells, and body actions communicate a language. The runaway potential will react according to unique experiences which are often buried until triggered. You might think there is only one meaning you are conveying, that which you intended.

The clothes you wear may include one item of the same type and color worn by an abusive mother. The way you motion with your hands may be the same way as the uncle at home who crawls into bed with the runaway. The tone of your voice may remind the youth of a condescending teacher who always patted you on the head and said, "Now, that's a good boy. Let's always do it that way."

Remember juice is not always a drink and a hustler is not always at a pool table. Juice can also represent power through political or social connections and a hustler may sell sex. Definitions are individualized and personal. Watch for shifting eyes and facial muscles around eyes, jaws and mouth. If there is a shift, stop and ask if you said or did something that offended or hurt. Runaways will often appreciate your concern and thank you by telling you about a flashback to a cruel experience. You may think that a touch on the arm or shoulder is a sign of friendliness but it may bring on a flashback of a molester or rapist. Trigger them and you may get violence.

Know the words and actions to which you are sensitive. You may not be able to desensitize yourself and that's all right. You are human. But, tell the youth ahead of time that just as they are sensitive to some things so are you. If it is "f __ you" then tell them that if you cringe it is only because it bothers you. In most cases, they will try to respect that you are also human and thus try to control the use of those words. Many of these youth are super-sensitive. If they weren't, they wouldn't be as likely to want to run or as likely to have survived.

Use successive approximations to reduce your sensitivity to touch, words, voice and clothes so that you can work out a gradual process of helping the youth reduce sensitivity.

I'm one of the survivors. I did my first serious attempt at running away at age sixteen. I ran away from a group foster home along with several other boys. We were tracked down by police in an open field.

Of course, I made a number of unsuccessful attempts in my youth. For my size running was better than fighting.

It is not uncommon for those who are the closest to a youth to be the ones who are the most abusive. Parents, foster parents, uncles, clergy, friends of the family, and camp counselors are usually respected by other adults and can avoid detection with a combination of threats and favors to the youth and sweet pleasantries to authorities. The youth will take a lot, especially if it's better than they had or if they know of no alternative.

Although you might think they like the runaway life, they don't. They want to find ways to better themselves. They don't know how to unlock doors to get help without fear of being hurt some more. While you might not be able to help all of them, you may be able to prevent many youth from running away as the only means to survival.

Apologize when you have offended or erred. Let your words and tone of voice be sincere. Remember these youth tend to be super-sensitive and can detect a phony.

Praise for the actions and words you like. Keep it sincere. Don't be overly repetitive but do it immediately, clearly, and loudly enough to be effective. It doesn't hurt to say words like, "that's great, I love it, I love you, do it again, you're super." Even though they may be affectionate words, and you wouldn't use them in public as they may be embarassing, they are appreciated. But be careful.

Watch for facial reactions. Your words could be misinterpreted as that of a pervert or you might trigger a memory of a traumatic experience.

When you correct them simply tell them what they did or said that needed correction, why, and what they might have done or said that would not have been objectionable. Say what you need to say cearly and precisely and be done. Don't repeat or crunch down. Remember they are sensitive. Even though they may come on loud, aggressive, and rapid it may be in defense so as not to crack or cry. Crying in public is not done by boys or by tough girls. We do our crying at night in private.

Give responsibility. Show trust. Take one step at a time. Ask them to "make an important telephone call, pick up an item from the store, deliver a message, lock the door." Ask. If there is acceptance of the request, don't repeat, just expect, then praise.

Be sure the task of responsibility and the trust that is given is real and not phony or made up. A phony smells. Be sure there is an understanding as to failure consequences to the project; how all are hurt, not just that youth.

Reciprocity is understood. "You trust me and I'll trust you; you protect me and I'll protect you." Be open about it.

There may have been a long path of criticism without responsibility and trust. Ask for help in establishing the baseline, where to start and how much is reasonable. Be open. Share, Don't expect a one-way street. These youth are not puppets. They will accept consequences when they are fair. Warn them of risks and possible consequences and let them fail if they still try something. But don't close the door, allow them to try again and again.

Progress is made in a series of jerks forward, backward, and forward again. Forward speed is often determined by your ability to sense the need to pull back, ask forgiveness for going too fast, ask permission to start again or try another way, and thus keep gaining trust and confidence.

Pick up on needs as soon as possible. Abuse starts early in life. But it is never too late to help. You can make a difference. Without people like Truman, Dolly, Connie, Mel, and Will I would not be able to be with you today. They had faith, helped without expecting favors, and were like the parents and teachers I missed. Please do what you can to help others.

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